
Washington's Ethiopia policy – hybrid warfare in the making (again)

By Rob Prince

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For some time now, since the Addis campaign to neutralize the Tigray military opposition, the US has been weaponizing the human rights and refugee issues in Ethiopia in a manner that is both cynical and dangerous, following to the destabilization patterns Washington has employed elsewhere... a first step leading to more aggressive actions? Hybrid warfare is on the 'menu': disinformation, sanctions, vilification of the leadership, ultimatums, distorted reporting on human rights abuses, political manipulation, no fly zones, military intervention of one kind or another – 'die gantse arbet!' (the whole works!)

A MEMORY STIRS...

It is 10 years ago and I am participating in a forum at the University of Denver's Korbel School of International Studies where I taught. It is just prior to the US-NATO orchestrated invasion of Libya and the overthrow of the Khadafi government. An atmosphere approaching hysteria prevails among the other panellists as well as the audience. The argument put forth at the time unproven then and never verified afterwards was that to save the lives of imprisoned Islamicists in Benghazi the United States and NATO had to bomb Libya.

The Libyan case was a classic example of war-making based on humanitarian intervention, a veil hiding the geopolitical motivations of regime change. Now 10 years on, with slight differences, a similar build-up towards war and regime change in Ethiopia is gaining steam. It is directed by some key players of Joe Biden's foreign policy team, Susan Rice, Anthony Blinken and Jake Sullivan.

The details between the Libyan and Ethiopian situations vary but the goal is the same: to force the government of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed

to share power with the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front through a maximum pressure campaign similar to the one the United States has forced on Iran. A second goal is to weaken Ethiopia from emerging as a vital regional force in the Horn of Africa, one that offers hope not only for Ethiopia's growing population of 108 million people but also for the surrounding countries Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea and Uganda.

Is the US Ethiopia policy shaping up along the same lines as that exercised in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya and Syria?

All this comes at a critical juncture in Ethiopian history, a crossroads that could lead to a socio-economic renaissance or back to the maelstrom of poverty and ethnic conflict.

THE CLOCK IS TICKING...

At a time when the prospects for a major socio-economic breakthrough in Ethiopia have never been greater, Washington's destabilisation efforts against Ethiopia have intensified in an effort to throw a monkey wrench into the country's development potential. Also, a growing COVID-19 threat as well as ethnic factionalism and other outside interference threatens this promising

moment as well.

Egypt and the United States are among those countries who consider an Ethiopian economic “take off” as a zero-sum game in which Ethiopia gains at Washington’s and Cairo’s expense. For Egypt “the Ethiopian threat” is a slight, but still unacceptable loss of regional influence that will result from Ethiopian socio-economic dynamism. The United States, on the other hand, appears mostly motivated by the possibility of curtailing the growing Chinese economic influence in Africa. Ethiopia is a key player in China’s Belt and Road Initiative into Africa (Maru, 2019).

Ethiopia’s Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is a major development project on the Blue Nile tributary, some 50 miles inside the country near its northern border with Sudan. From Ethiopia, the Blue Nile, which provides over 90% of Egypt’s water supply, runs through Sudan and Egypt, emptying into the Mediterranean Sea near Alexandria. When completed, the GERD will be able to harness enough electrical energy for all of Ethiopia as well as enough to sell to surrounding countries.

The water diversion that Egypt fears is not a goal. In spite of reassurances from Ethiopia that this is the case, Egypt wants to maintain the regional status quo. Developing a more balanced power sharing mechanism in which all the countries of the Nile River Basin, both up and down stream, would have a say seems particularly threatening to Cairo which has threatened to bomb the dam should the Ethiopians complete it and begin its operations.

Egypt’s relationship with its upstream Nile River partners has long been of a “core-peripheral” nature. Egypt worries about losing its privileged status as the regional hegemonic power dominating the Nile River flows. In such a massive project, funded in large measure by the Ethiopian people themselves, of course *there are* technical issues that need to be resolved. But the

political issues are more intractable, especially for Egypt which refuses to give up what amounts to an outdated colonial control of the Nile based on treaties signed during the British colonial period and in which Ethiopia had no role.

Put bluntly, Ethiopia has the ethical upper hand. Its case for building the dam, and how the dam will spur development throughout the Horn of Africa, is strong and logical. It has the ethical high ground but not the ‘math’ ie the balance of power is not in its favour given the backing Egypt enjoys from the United States and the European Union as well as a number of Arab countries.

THIS IS THE DILEMMA.

Make no mistake, Egypt has the United States, and to a certain degree some countries of the Arab Peninsula with sizeable interests in Ethiopia, on its side. Washington is no neutral arbitrator. It has made clear that it sides 100% with Cairo against the plans and interests of Addis Ababa. Just how lopsided is Washington’s support for Egypt became obvious when the Washington-inspired talks between Egypt and Ethiopia broke down over the future of the GERD.

Three examples of Washington’s increased belligerence towards Ethiopia:

1. In his usual crude manner Donald Trump, who had hoped to use peace-making between Egypt and Ethiopia as a ticket for a Nobel Peace Prize, openly attacked Ethiopia. Oddly enough, Trump did so at a Washington DC signing of the normalisation of relations between Israel and Sudan. As reported in the online edition of the Council on Foreign Relations (Gavin, 2020):

During the conversation with the Sudanese and

Israeli prime ministers, the president of the United States took it upon himself to casually issue a bellicose threat to Ethiopia on behalf of Egypt and its president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a man Trump has referred to as “my favourite dictator”.

Seemingly miffed by the failure of his administration’s clumsy effort to broker a deal on the use of Nile waters now that Ethiopia’s Grand Renaissance Dam has become a reality, Trump posited that Egypt “will end up blowing up the dam. . . . they’ll blow up that dam. And they have to do something. . . . They should have stopped it long before it was started.”

2. Prior to President Trump’s unconscionable “Egypt-should-bomb-the-dam” threat, Washington was already putting pressure on Ethiopia to concede to Egypt’s demands for full control over the Nile waters. For many years, Washington has pressurised the World Bank not to grant loans to Ethiopia, moneys needed to help build the GERD. In 2020, the Trump Administration had first appropriated \$453,000,000 in aid to Ethiopia. Already in August, 2020, the US cut that amount by \$130 million in response to Ethiopia’s refusal to sign the so-called Washington GERD agreement.

Adding fuel to the anti-Ethiopian fire, more pressure was exerted on Ethiopia, when, on September 2, 2020, Trump personally intervened ➤

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vindictively by ordering direct aid cuts to Ethiopia because of “lack of progress” in Ethiopia’s talks with Egypt and Sudan over the GERD. The *New York Times* observed, “It was an unusual example of Mr Trump’s direct intervention on an issue in Africa, a continent he hasn’t visited as president and rarely mentions publicly.” It turned out that the actual US cuts to Ethiopian aid were much deeper; “the actual cut was more than double of what was reported in August for a whopping \$264 million cut (42%) in antiterrorism and development assistance for Ethiopia.”

3. Washington’s animosity towards the Ethiopian government is bipartisan, involving both Democratic and Republic administrations. Blaming the deteriorating US-Ethiopian connection on the Trump Administration is too simple



and inaccurate. Biden’s tone towards Ethiopia might not be as blatantly vulgar as Donald Trump’s openly racist rhetoric with the latter’s description of “shit hole countries” and his comments that Egypt should bomb the GERD *but the content is essentially the same*: intimidation, disinformation, ultimatums, sanctions, etc.

The United States, Europe and their media have been waging a relentless hybrid war of words, economic pressure and disinformation against Ethiopia, “weaponizing” human and refugee rights. The fact is US Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, has designated Ethiopia as an object of ‘active engagement’ and special focus. It may sound innocuous enough but is nothing less than a threat that if Ethiopia doesn’t bend to Washington’s will, the pressure on Addis Ababa will be intensified. (Mariam, 2021)

From 1991 until 2018, Ethiopia was governed by a clique of the Tigray ethnic minority known as the Tigray Peoples’ Liberation Front (TPLF). Those years were

characterized by the TPLF’s dictatorship, ruthless repression, the setting of other Ethiopian ethnic communities against one another, massive corruption and a breath-taking level of personal graft with more than \$30 billion of the country’s wealth being squirreled away in Tigray emigre communities the world over, including the United States (Steinman, 2017). A goodly percentage of Ethiopian emigres to the United States came to escape the Tigray-dominated government repression.

If Washington usually ignored the sorry Tigray record on human rights, it is because the TPLF has long been useful to US geostrategic aims in the Horn of Africa. Providing Washington with its necessary plausible deniability, the cover it needs to veil its interventionist foreign policy, twice during that period, the Tigray government, acting as Washington’s cat’s paw, engaged in military operations in the region.

- In 1998 it invaded Eritrea occupying 25% of the country. The TPLF was used as a tool of Washington to subdue Eritrea

because its resistance to its Washington-based structural programmes and refusal to participate in AFRICOM.¹

- Then in 2006, again, pushed by Washington, Ethiopia invaded Somalia. The only African state that opposed the invasion of Somalia by Ethiopia at the time was Eritrea. At the time the ICU-Islamic Council were undermining the power of local warlords and bringing them under some kind of control in an effort to stabilise the country.

While not abandoning its relations with Washington, Ethiopia looked for other sources of foreign aid and found them in the growing relationship with China. The China-Ethiopia relationship has grown since and partially as a result, Ethiopia has experienced a dramatic growth spurt, which has only intensified since the TPLF ceded power to a new coalition led by Abiy Ahmed, the country's Prime Minister.

THE CHRIS COONS VISIT: THE SOLIDIFICATION OF AN ANTI-ETHIOPIAN WASHINGTON STANCE

There are indications that both the US and EU prefer a weak, famine-stricken, ethnically fragmented, “tamed” state in Ethiopia to what Ethiopia is becoming: an emerging regional power that has the potential to change the geopolitical map of the region. Nothing exemplifies this tendency, as well as the continuity of US Ethiopia policy, more clearly than US Senator Chris Coons’ Ethiopia trip of March, 2021.

Although it was billed as a fact-finding mission to evaluate the contradictory narratives emerging of the Ethiopian government’s crushing of a Tigray rebellion, it was nothing of the kind. Just prior to Coons’ Ethiopian visit, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken alleged without providing

evidence that ethnic cleansing had taken place in Western Tigray Province. Instead, Coons relayed Biden’s message to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed with a two-part ultimatum:

Ethiopia must postpone the completion of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and that the Ethiopian government should reconcile and enter into negotiations with the Tigray Popular Liberation Front, which had just attempted to overthrow the government.

It makes one wonder if Coons’ visit was nothing other than an exercise in political diktat, a threat rather than a sincere fact-finding mission. Ethiopia categorically rejected both US demands. Almost immediately thereafter, the US Senate and House began drafting resolutions to increase the pressure on Ethiopia.

A little background to the Chris Coons visit:

On the night of November 3, 2020 (The Queen of Sheba, 2021) a military force of the TPLF attacked an Ethiopian Federal Army base of the Northern Command in Tigray Province, Ethiopia. The Ethiopian soldiers and their officers were asleep at the time. This attack was not the only one. On the same day the TFLP also attacked 200 other sites and bases throughout Ethiopia, massacring thousands and doing so in a way that can only be considered barbaric: slitting throats, slashing guts, and cutting off breasts of women soldiers.

In what was a killing spree the TFLP militia surrounded Ethiopian government soldiers en masse, chasing them with heavy trucks, mowing them down with well-placed machine guns as they ran for their lives. Then they turned on civilians in Mai-Kadra, going house to house, systematically hunting down and killing people. “In that tragic day of infamy, over 1,000 civilians mostly

young Amhara men were slaughtered by crazed Tigrayan militia and special forces” (The Queen of Sheba, 2021).

With this uprising, the TFLP had hoped to trigger a national uprising of other ethnic groups in Ethiopia. It did not happen. Within two days the Ethiopian National Defence Force (ENDF) conducted devastating counter attacks which quickly neutralised the TFLP’s military potential. The TFLP’s effort to overthrow the Addis Ababa government completely failed. Understanding that their efforts to return to power militarily had fizzled, the Tigray leadership shifted gears hoping to win diplomatically what they had lost on the battlefield. By November 8, 2020 a mere five days after having launched their offensive the Tigray “cried uncle” and with the support of the Biden Administration, called for negotiations in an effort to preserve a modicum of power.

The US response to the Ethiopian government’s crushing of the Tigray Rebellion was both curious and immediate. Rather than congratulating Ahmed Abiy’s government for preventing a threat to Ethiopian sovereignty that could have plunged the country into a “Yugoslavia-like” crisis, Washington weighed in heavily on the side of the Tigray partitionists, with the media chiming in.

Five months on, it continues to do so unabated.

Unverified reports of government war crimes and ethnic cleansing in the Tigray region began appearing in the US media based on a secret report the US government offered to the *New York Times*. “Ethiopia’s War Leads to Ethnic Cleansing in Tigray Region.” and which the *Times* cited (Walsh, 2021). When asked to see the evidence, neither the *Times* nor the State Department would release the report to the Ethiopian government or the public. Ethiopian government denials received scant attention. >>



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Given this disturbing record and the general direction of US-Ethiopian relations, what can be done? A few general ideas:

1. Susan Rice should be denied any responsibility for US-Ethiopian relations. Her partisan history and connection to the TPLF is too intimate for her or her well know coterie to play any kind of constructive role. Although officially, she is not in charge of the State Department’s “Ethiopia

File” in fact there are many indications that she still plays a decisive role. (Mariam, 2021)

2. The United States got off to a bad start in its relations with Ethiopia. It needs a different approach, one that is not based upon that long habit of diktat, regime change and sanctions. Such a policy will only drive Ethiopia as it has Iran to “look east” as its relationship with the West become more empty and shallow.
3. Rather than taking a partisan position in Egypt’s favour against the Ethiopian project of completing the GERD, the United States should help facilitate an African regional framework to manage the waters of the Nile River, one that is inclusive and democratic, given the importance of the dam’s completion both to Ethiopian development and that of the Horn of Africa.

Of course, nudging Washington to change direction will be no easy task. But when has the struggle for human rights been easily won?

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ENDNOTES

- 1 AFRICOM is responsible for all US Department of Defence operations, exercises and security cooperation on the African continent. **NA**